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ABSTRACT

Structured interviews and case analyses were used to assess the support systems of 20 women enrolled in General Educational Development (GED) preparation classes in Connecticut. None was found to have a complete system of support--that is, one lacking in neither sources nor types of support as defined by the researchers--for their educational studies. Four respondents had educational support systems that were complete in terms of number of sources; two had systems in which all types were represented. Case analysis results indicated that intimate sources were found to be lacking most frequently. The other three sources--family, friends, and institutional--were more equally lacking to a lesser degree. Case analysis revealed that students were most lacking in the challenging type of support, while student self-reports indicated that resource support was felt to be most lacking. The most significant finding was that although resource pool type of support was found to be least lacking by case analysis and most helpful by respondents' reports, it was also recognized by the women to be the most needed type of support. Other important findings were the lack of husbands' support and no recognition of a need for challenging types of support. (A bibliography and the interview questionnaire are attached.) (YLB)

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# AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS OF FEMALE G.E.D. STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF
THE EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS
OF FEMALE G.E.D. STUDENTS

Support can be viewed as a crucial variable in the academic success of adult learners. This exploratory study used structured interviews and case analyses to assess the support systems of female G.E.D. students in the Vernon, Connecticut Regional Adult Basic Education Program. None of the students were found to have complete support systems as defined by the researcher. Case analysis revealed that students were most lacking in the challenging type of support, while student self reports indicated that resource support was felt to be most lacking. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### Rationale

Support can be viewed as a crucial factor in the transition process of the adult who is using learning for the purpose of enhancing growth or coping with change. Numerous writers (Knox, 1977; Schlossberg, 1981; Kahn and Antonucci, 1980; Danish, 1980; Brammer and Abrego, 1981) have suggested that support plays a primary role in the transition process. Transitions, furthermore, have been found to be the major triggers for adult learning (Aslanian and Brickell, 1980).

In spite of these findings, however, little research has been done on the support systems of adult learners. The counseling needs and personal motivating forces of adult learners in general (Grabowski, 1976; Cross, 1981) and the educationally disadvantaged specifically (Knox, 1979) have been ruefully neglected in research literature. Cross (1981) has suggested that graduate programs in adult education have failed to produce scholars and that a marketplace orientation exists in adult education today which inhibits the proliferation of such research.

Nonetheless, the failure of adult education programs to attract the educationally disadvantaged is well-documented (Cross, 1981; London, 1976). Even the most enterprising adult educator may view with enthusiasm any research into support as a motivating phenomenon for the educationally disadvantaged. Some research already exists which indicates that a perceived lack of institutional supports (tutoring and counseling) is a major reason for non-participation in Adult Basic Education programs (Clark, 1979).

Cross (1981, p. 139) proposes that educators must try to tap the support of "significant others" in order to increase participation of underrepresented groups in adult education. There is also some evidence that female students are especially responsive to support in attaining education (Finn, Reis, and Dulberg, 1980).

Purpose

The need to assess existing institutional and personal support systems of the educationally disadvantaged adult learner is apparent. The following study attempts to address that need by laying groundwork for support research with educationally disadvantaged women students.

Specifically, the purpose of the following study was to preliminarily assess the support systems of a selected group of women enrolled in General Educational Development (G.E.D.) preparation classes. The goals of this research were to form hypotheses about the support systems of educationally disadvantaged women students and to offer recommendations for research and counseling.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Knox (1977, pp.66-67) summarizes characteristics of home and family settings which seem to be associated with adult development and learning. In addition to family support, encouragement, adaptation, and recognition, he notes that familiarity with other adults as role models engaged in systematic learning and adaptation is also important.

Abundant research is cited by Brammer and Abrego (1981) which indicates the importance of a support network during a transition.

In running adult transition groups, Brammer and Abrego found that people often discover their support networks to be incomplete and inadequate and that they often expect all of their support to come from a few people. They urge people to include a variety of people in their social network including Barrie Hopson's "types of people":

1) people to depend on in a crisis
2) people with whom to discuss concerns
3) people to feel close to
4) people who can make us feel competent and valued
5) people who can give us important information
6) people who will challenge our stereotyped thinking
7) people with whom we can share good news and feelings.

Hopson (1981) has credited these types to Charlie Seashore of the National Training Laboratories. Seashore's original types of people affiliated with one's transition world included (1978)

1) people who love you just the way you are
2) rooters: fans for where you're going
3) a resource pool of people who could be helpful
4) challengers: people who allow you to envision what you could be
5) toxic people: people who put you down.

Such types of supportive people appear to make up the support systems of adults. Nancy Schlossberg (1981) has indentified four major sources of these types of support people. Intimate relationships, the family unit, and a network of friends seem to comprise one's interpersonal support systems. A fourth source

of support is institutional support which includes organizations, agencies, or rituals.

Kahn and Antonucci (1980) defined social support as interpersonal transactions that include one or more of the following key elements: affect, affirmation, and aid. They used the concept of a person's "convoy of social support" as a dynamic network of properties that include size, stability, homogeneity, symmetry and connectedness. Kahn and Antonucci studied social support by asking a respondent to "list people who are important to you or to whom you are important" in each of six role categories: spouse or partner, family, co-worker, supervisors, professionals and friends. They then measured social support separately for three categories of affect, affirmation, and aid.

The three Kahn and Antonucci categories seem to bear similarity to Hopsons's and Seashore's types. Their six role categories also seem to overlap somewhat with Schlossberg's four support sources. None of the above authors, however, used these models in research related specifically to adult transitions, adult learners, the educationally disadvantaged, or women.

Some research, however, does exist in these areas. Danish (1980) notes that a number of studies have pointed out the importance of supportive networks and interpersonal resources for individuals experiencing critical life events. He concludes that the impact of critical life events may be altered by the quality of the support system available to the individual.

Gore (1973), studying the impact of job loss on men, found evidence of this. Dickey (1977) found that although the postulated

buffering effects of support on the stress of life events of women did not develop in her empirical data, they were supported by the interview data. No relationship was found, however, between women's re-entry support scores and the number of semester hours completed for mature college women (Reed, 1977).

Less advantaged women, on the other hand, appear to need the support of others in dealing with their transitions. A study by Weiss of low-income single-parent women (Schlossberg, 1981) indicated that low-income single-parent women seem to need a temporary alliance with an authoritative figure from whom they seek help of two kinds:

1) the provision of concrete services and

2) the provision of support and guidance.

In discussing the lower educational attainment of women as a worldwide phenomenon, Finn, Reiss, and Dulberg (1980) observe that there is evidence that girls and women, even more than their male counterparts would benefit educationally from increased levels of support and encouragement. They cite research which suggests that young women are more dependent on teachers and family than young men and are thus more subject to suggestibility than males. Thus, they may respond more readily to both positive and negative expectations held for them by significant others.

The support of a spouse appears to be of special importance to the adult student. Heistand (1971, p.95) observed that one crucial factor toward the success and satisfaction of the adult student is the attitude of the adult's spouse when he or she returns to school. Brooks (in Harmon et. al, 1978) reviewed

similar findings in regards to women suggesting further that husbands frequently "pay lip service" to supporting their wives, but fail to follow through with active help at home.

Lewis (1981), similarly, found that in relationships where the wife was pursuing doctoral studies, couples did not modify the distribution of responsibility during the time the wife was a student. Since the males were assessed to be pro-feminist in their views of women in this study, one wonders about the spousal support available to women of lower educational attainment where more traditional values dominate.

## III. METHODOLOGY

The following definitions were used to facilitate operationalize the progress of the research:

Educationally disadvantaged adult - an adult not possessing a high school diploma or its equivalent.

G.E.D. program participant - any member of a class organized for the purpose of preparing to take the General Educational Development Examination (used synonymously with High School Equivalency Preparation classes).

General Educational Development Examination - Examination which, if completed successfully, entitles the examinee to a state high school equivalency diploma.

The sample used for the present explanation were twenty adult females who were participating in the G.E.D. program sponsored by the Vernon Regional Adult Basic Education Program. Nine of the respondents in the sample were also engaged in programs

sponsored by Headstart. The Vernon Adult Basic Education Program and the Headstart program cooperatively organized the G.E.D. program for these participants.

All students were concurrently participating in career counseling workshops in three separate towns in the Vernon Region. Since the career counseling component was elected by these subjects and not all G.E.D. program participants in the three towns made this election, inferences to the larger G.E.D. program population could be made only with caution. Furthermore, the three towns used in the sample were suburban areas. No urban or rural subjects participated in this preliminary research and no attempt was made to select a sample which could be considered representative of the larger G.E.D. program population. In essence, the sample was one of convenience to the researcher.

The sample consisted of 20 women ranging in age from 18 to 46. Eight married, two separated, three never married, and seven divorced women engaged in the study. Only the three single women did not have children. All other respondents had one or more children living with them with six being the largest number of children living in one household.

Structured interviews were conducted with each student based on interview guidelines suggested by Goode (1958). Each interview lasted between fifteen and twenty minutes and was conducted by the author, who also serves as a career counselor with the women. Questions were developed based on Schlossberg's sources of support discussed earlier. Pilot interviews, conducted with five of the women not included in the sample, contributed to the development

of the final structured interview questionnaire. Open-ended questions were used as recommended by Kerlinger (1973) because of their usefulness in exploratory research. Notes were taken by the interviewer during the sessions. A copy of the interview schedule appears in the appendix.

Following a design similar to that of Kahn and Antonucci (1980), a combination of qualitative and descriptive-quantitative analyses were used to asses the data. A case analysis was done for each respondent and then simple frequencies were computed. Since the quality of support within each case was viewed to be of primary significance to the researcher, and since the sample was not representative of a larger population, extensive quantitative analyses were deemed unnecessary. Furthermore, they were thought to be potentially misleading and inappropriate to the exploratory nature of the research.

Questions were selected to elicit responses which would indicate the types of support each respondent was receiving in each of four source categories described by Schlossberg; A. intimate, B. family, C. friends, and D. institutional sources. Types of support adapted from the Seashore model discussed earlier were than analyzed for each case, by the researcher. The following categories of support types were used.

1) Affection Security support pool:

   People who love you just the way you are.

2) Rooter support pool:

   Fans for where you're going.

3) Resource support pool:

People who are or could be helpful.

People who provide needed services, information, finances.

4) Challengers:

People who show you what you could be.

Critical evaluators

Mentors

Role models

5) Counter-supports:

Toxic people who keep putting you or your efforts down.

A grid for each case was made using the alphabetical code A-D for the source of support (as labled above) and numerical code (1-5) for the type of support. A sample grid for one case appears below.

TABLE 1

Respondent 1

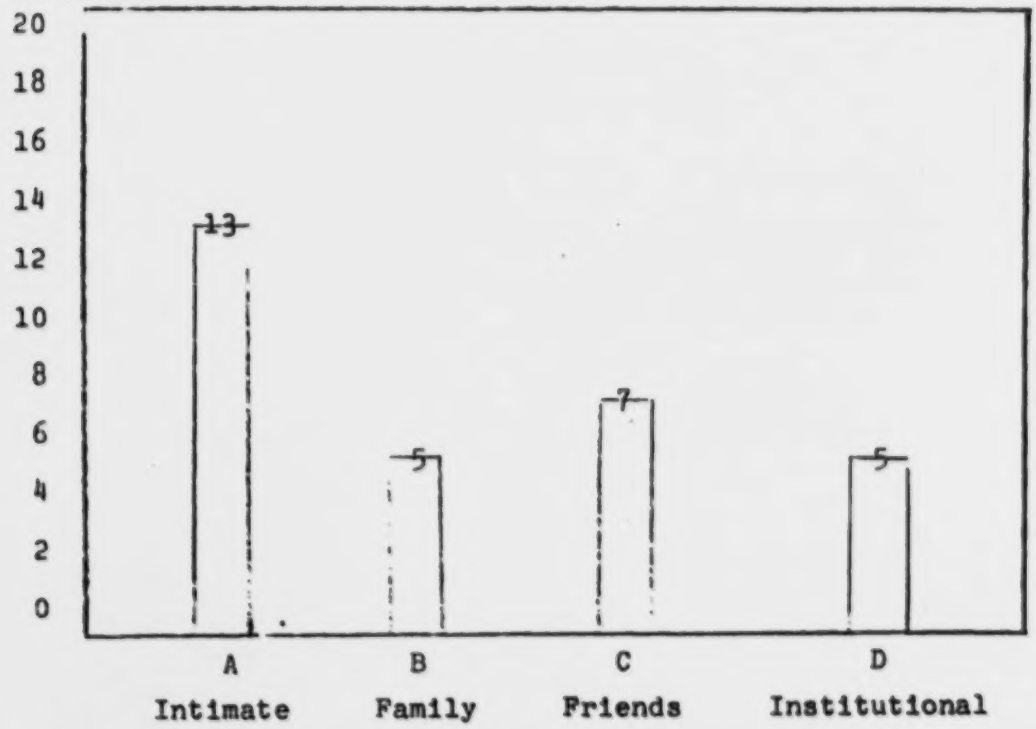
| Sources | Types 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A. Intimate | X | X | | | |
| B. Family | X | | X | | |
| C. Friends | | | X | | |
| D. Institutional | | | X | | |

Types and sources of support lacking for the individual cases were noted and frequencies of lacking types and sources were calculated across sources and types. Frequencies were also calculated for two questions which asked about desired support from the ABE "institution" and the "most helpful" source of support.

## IV. RESULTS

Case analysis revealed that none of the 20 respondents had a complete system of support for their educational studies. A complete support system is defined as one lacking in neither sources nor types of supports as defined by the researcher. Four of the respondents or 20%, however, did have educational support systems which were complete in terms of the number of sources, while two (10%) of the respondents had systems in which all types were represented. It should be pointed out that analysis was not done within each type or source to determine the quantity or quality of support within each category. Hence, the results only indicated completeness according to the broad categories defined by the researcher.

TABLE 2




Source lacking by case analysis

Case analysis results indicated that intimate sources were found to be lacking most frequently (N=13) in the respondents educational support systems. The other three sources family, friends, and institutional were more equally lacking for the respondent to a lesser degree. See Table 2 above.

TABLE 3

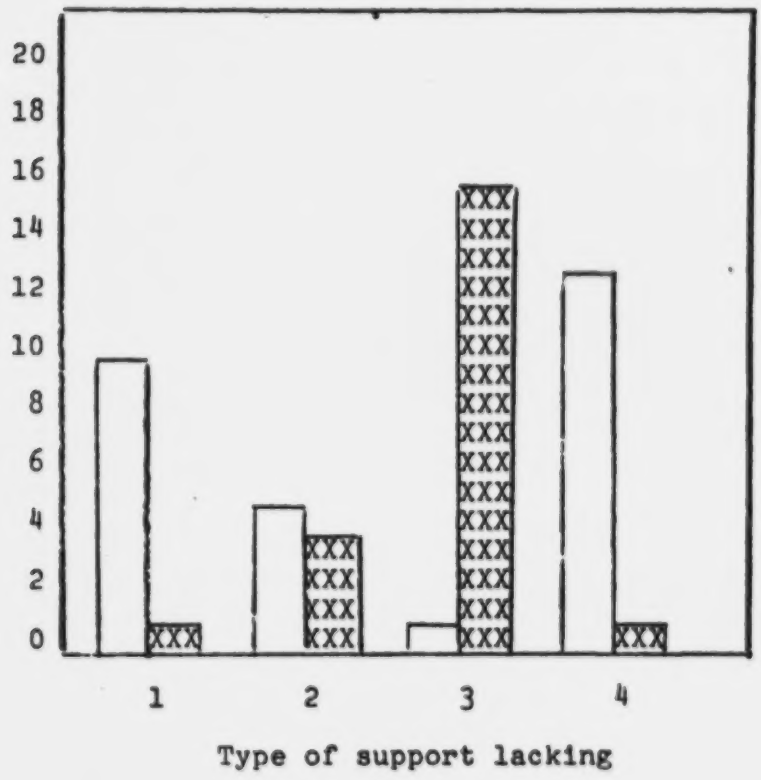
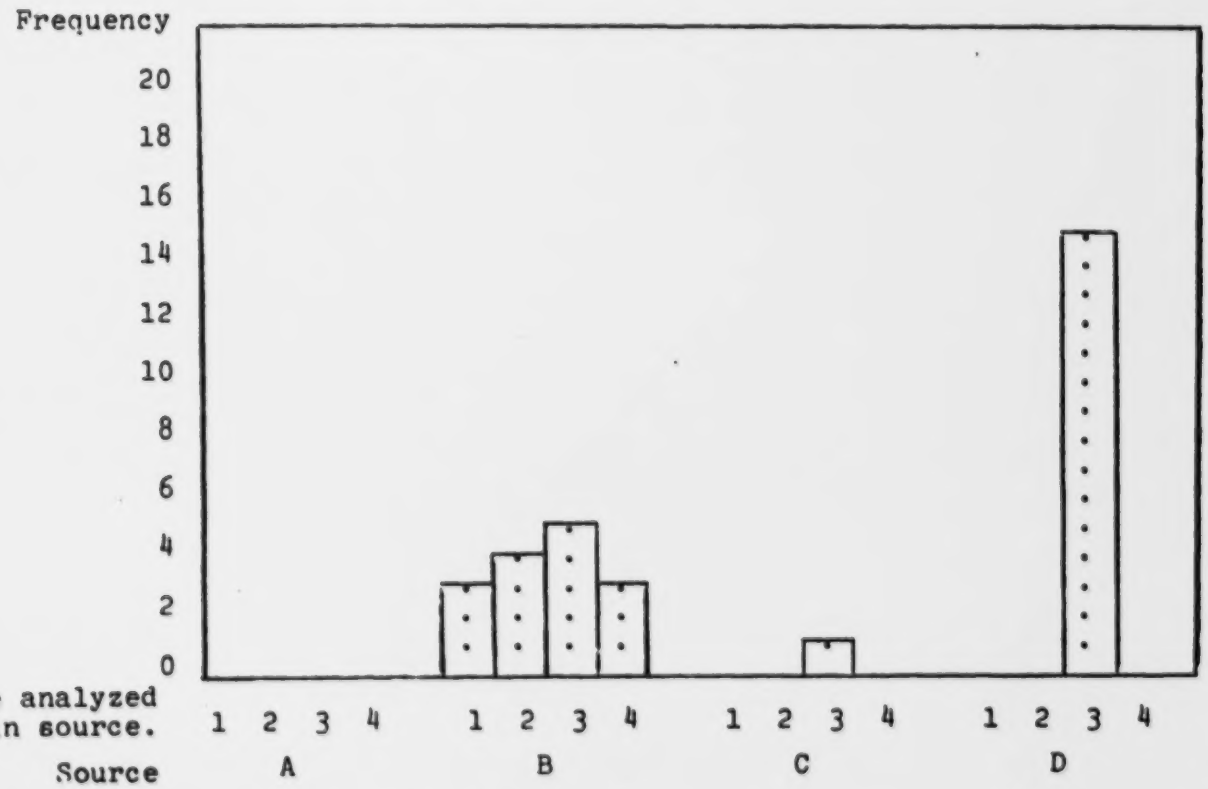



Table 3 demonstrates that the challenging type of support was most consistently lacking in the support systems of these adult learners. Interestingly, the resource type of support

was found to be lacking least frequently by case analysis, yet it was also the most frequently requested type of support. Sixteen respondents or 80% of the sample requested this type. Furthermore, when respondents were asked what was most helpful to them in going to school, they fairly consistently identified sources which were predominantly providing the "resource" type of support. See Table 4. Only two of the respondents identified their most helpful sources as ones which did not supply support of the resource type.

TABLE 4




N>20 since more than one source or type were recorded for some respondents.

Most helpful sources of support identified by respondents.

A notable observation is that intimate sources of support were not mentioned by any of the respondents as being most helpful. Quite to the contrary, four married and one separated respondent identified their husbands as opposing their efforts to earn a high school diploma. The "toxic" type of responses ranged from direct "putting me down all the time" to a "he just wants to keep me in my place."

Only one other "toxic" type of individual was mentioned in the interviews. A teenaged daughter who asked her mother, "Ma, what have you done with your life? - Nothing." also appeared to challenge her mother by her put-down remarks. Children, who were most often mentioned as family supports, seemed to provide consistent affection. They were, however, infrequently (n=2) mentioned as the most helpful source of support.

It should be noted that in all cases, the respondents were asked only for their partners, family, and friends responses to their going to school. Requests for positive support were made directly, but no specific questions were asked regarding oppositional forces. In order that toxic sources not be confused with positive sources, type "5" was not included in the result tables.

## V. DISCUSSION

Perhaps the most significant finding for the purposes of further research was the finding that although resource pool type of support was found to be least lacking by case analysis and most helpful by respondents' reports, it was also recognized by the women to be the most needed type of support. The present

research did not attempt to quantify support within each category, nor did it distinguish subtypes within the categories.

It is quite feasible that the resource category was overly broad and encompassed subtypes of varying importance to the women. Resources to help the women through the process of attending classes (babysitting services, transportation, tutoring) appeared to be mentioned more often throughout the interviews than those which would be helpful in their future plans. This is understandable in view of the fact that all of the Headstart participants were from low-income families and the majority of other students were on some form of public assistance as well, Hence, services which would normally be costly to them were considered of major importance in attending school. Furthermore, many of the respondents were single parents or married women with generally unsupportive husbands who could not rely on husbands for such services.

The lack of support of the part of the husbands was striking. Research analysis has obliterated the poignancy of the remarks made by the women with regard to the lack of support they were being given in their endeavors. A major question arose in my mind as to how "intimate" some of these marriage partners really were. By defining my Schlossberg category as husband or partner, I may have included some non-intimate relationships while excluding some intimate ones.

A third important finding was that although challenging types of support were found to be lacking by analysis, the students did not recognize any need for it. Only one single woman noted that her father was the most helpful source of support and case

analysis revealed that his support was of the challenging type. Some authors have attributed phenomena similar to this to Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Some further information, not included in the report results, because of research design, but uncovered incidentally, the Headstart women, whose children attend classes together and who attend programs together outside of the G.E.D. classes appeared to already have established a cohesive support group for themselves. The "Buddy System" was mentioned repeatedly by these women as an important form of support. Classmates were viewed as important resource supports. The services of the Headstart program which included free babysitting, transportation, and motivational "door prizes" were not offered to the G.E.D. participants in the other programs. Classmates were not mentioned as frequently by non-Headstart G.E.D. participants as sources of support. Also, the G.E.D. - only participants more frequently requested the types of services offered to the Headstart women.

No statistical comparisons were made between the two groups due to the small size and the unrepresentativeness of the sample. Again, this major limitation of the study makes it imperative that conclusions not be drawn about the larger G.E.D. population. A further limitation, not discussed previously, but which needs mention is that this study sought to assess only the educational support systems of these women. Their overall support systems or other specific support systems (such as those for parenting or a weight loss program) may be quite different. Other limitations of the study have been discussed in other sections of this report.

Some hypotheses can be made based on the results of the study, nonetheless. It appears, for example, that resource types are most important in the support systems of educationally disadvantaged adult women. The high frequency of responses which indicated the importance of resource supports leads one to believe that such a finding would hold up in the larger population of educationally disadvantaged adult learners.

The lack of spousal support was also pronounced. Although the Headstart subgroup may have skewed the results of this study somewhat, one may tentatively hypothesize that spousal support for G.E.D. program women is not satisfactory.

One may further hypothesize that "challenging" supports are not availalbe to female G.E.D. programs participants. Such supports, however, may not be valued or perceived as needed by the educationally disadvantaged.

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations can be made for further research based on the findings of this exploratory study:

1) Research should be conducted with a random sample of female G.E.D. students.

2) The "resource" category of support should be analyzed for the presence of subfactors before conducting such research.

3) The structured interview method was well-received by the participants in the study and can be recommended as an effective procedure with this population.

4) The case analysis using categories of support was useful for data analysis with this population. Additional raters,

however, are imperative to determine the reliability of the analysis.

5) Future research may be conducted to test hypotheses based on the major findings of this study.

6) Comparison groups may be used in future research. Researchers may, for example, test for differences between sexes, groups of differing educational levels, or group receiving different kinds of institutional support.

7) Counselors and adult educators may wish to experiment with providing different types of support (eg. challenging) than they normally use with their G.E.D. students.

A final recommendation, not of a research nature, is for the addition of more support services in adult education programs to enable more educationally disadvantaged to participate in adult education. Adult educators have long been aware of this need. This study simply emphasizes that need.

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## Appendix

### STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

I am currently trying to find out information about the kinds of support adult learners are receiving while they are participating in classes. Support can be any form of encouragement, guidance, or help that you may be receiving. Your answers to the following questions would provide information helpful to me in my study.

1. What is your marital status?
2. What is your age?
3. How many children do you have living with you?
4. How does your husband or partner feel about your going to school?
5. What kinds of support, if any, does he give you that makes going to school easier?
6. How could he be more supportive?
7. How do other family members feel about your going to school?
8. What kinds of support, if any, do they give you that makes going to school easier?
9. How could they be more supportive?
10. How do your friends feel about your going to school?
11. What kinds of support, if any, do they give you that makes going to school easier?
12. What kinds of support do you receive from the educational program you are attending?
13. What other kind of support would be helpful if it were offered?
14. In general, what has been most helpful to you in trying to go to school?